

AUROVILLE TODAY

September 1990

Auroville - Kottakuppam 605104 - Tamil Nadu - India

Number Twenty-One

"A treasure of honey in the combs of God"

The honeybee does not readily pop into the mind as a creature that would give preference to the Matrimandir construction site as a home...

Since the construction of Matrimandir started in 1971, wild creatures of many kinds have been attracted to the site. The pigeons who attended the inauguration of Matrimandir were under the impression that a large, luxury housing development had begun for them and have acted on that supposition ever since. Naturally, the ubiquitous crow moved in from day one, finding bent nails and rusted binding wire ideal nesting materials. The two monkeys who tried to live at Matrimandir were harassed out by their less hairy cousins who became really aggressive after their tea biscuits were stolen. It goes almost without saying that generations of doves, cockroaches, bats, mynahs, scorpions, owls, kingfishers et al were born, grew up and died knowing Matrimandir as their only home. The Matrimandir worker is another species, but one that requires a separate in-depth study.

Anyway, so much for the allegation that grey concrete is an unnatural material and emits bad vibrations. This is most notably contradicted by one wild creature who always fondly accepts Matrimandir as a suitable home for the whole family. This in spite of the fact that Matrimandir does not resemble a tree and is full of loud noises, machines and constant activity. Known as a denizen of sylvan settings and bucolic atmospheres, murmuring amid blossoms, the honeybee does not readily pop into the mind as a creature that would give preference to the Matrimandir construction site as a home. However, this has sometimes been happening.

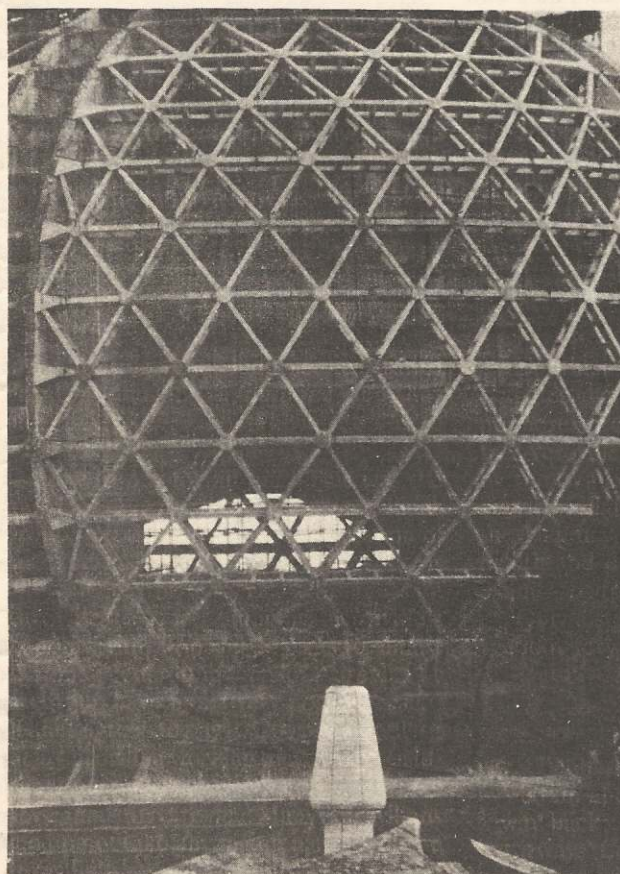
All three types of the main honeybee strains indigenous to India have lived, or are living at Matrimandir. The first is the small flower bee (*Apis florea*), the second is the common honeybee (*Apis indica*) and the third is the rock bee (*Apis dorsata*). The rock bee is the largest and strongest of the three. Even though it is not normally domesticated or used in beekeeping, it produces 80% of the honey sold commercially. The reason the rock bee is not favoured for beekeeping is fairly simple—it might kill you!

In fact, Matrimandir workers were once under the impression that only four stings from the rock bee would suffice. Then, one day, some village boys threw stones at the comb hanging from the floor of the Matrimandir chamber, and the bees attacked everyone in the area. Several people were stung more than four times and were happy to be able to tell the story. In fact, they talked about it for days. Nobody could forget that Saturday morning. Most of the workers were at the weekly meeting in the office when there was a fast evacuation of the structure. The favoured method of escape was a mad dash and dip in the curing pond. Of course, some rushed into the meeting bringing the bees with them and then the whole meeting stomped



and thrashed about and also madly rushed for the curing pond, where the meeting adjourned. General Tewari was escorting some visitors that morning and when the surprise attack hit him, he rallied his visitors into beating a hasty retreat and saved them, even though he suffered some direct hits, from being outflanked. Finally the bees were burned out. This was two years ago.

Recently, the rock bees returned, high up and directly in the centre of the north pillar: Mahakali. Mahakali always lives up to her name: "Indifference, negligence and sloth in the divine work she (Mahakali) cannot bear and she smites awake at once with sharp pain, if need be, the untimely slumberer and the loiterer", writes Sri Aurobindo.



What is the message of the rock bee? Among the theories ominous, occult and fantastic perhaps only the proposal that the skin of the structure will become a honeycomb need be mentioned. This way the bees could determine who would enter and any wrong movement would mean oblivion. However, before this proposal could be widely discussed, a strong wind blew down a section of honeycomb and the bees attacked again. Fortunately it was early afternoon when Matrimandir workers and visitors are not always present

in large numbers, so not too many people were stung.

The crew who burned the bees out the first time moved into action again. This time, armed with the new industrial vacuum cleaner, they merely sucked up some of the bees. The big comb in the Mahakali pillar, however, required an elaborate night plan. The Matrimandir crew, outnumbered by ten thousand to one, all got into the Nursery's bullock cart and slowly and quietly ascended up the outside edge of the pillar, hauled up by the Matrimandir crane. (The bullock preferred to remain on the ground.) Once the bees were all sucked up in the vacuum cleaner, they descended to a waiting Gypsy Jeep which transported the bees to the Madras road. There they were unceremoniously ejected and left to figure out their future.

The estimate for the maximum number of stings that one can survive has now risen from four to thirty—but nobody wants to learn the correct answer. Other mysteries remain: what happened to the honey? In the ancient Vedas, honey symbolises Ananda. As Sri Aurobindo puts it, there is always "a treasure of honey in the combs of God."

Bill

Economy

'Proposal 2': A collective choice

The 15th of August has always been a notable occasion, and an auspicious date for inaugurations. This year it is a new economic experiment that swings into operation: the implementation of 'proposal 2' (see *Auroville Today* # 16). This proposal is only one step in the gradual change of Auroville's economy—a step towards a more 'collective' (or for those who dislike this word, 'other') kind of economy. It provides for the running expenses of Auroville collective services: Pour Tous (Auroville's food distribution system), the Water Service, the Health and Dental Care, Nandini (free clothing service) and the Electrical Service. It also provides for the budgets of children's nutrition (meals and snacks at school), children's maintenance (allowance for a number of children), and for the Bridging Fund and the Personal Emergency Fund (two funds that assist Aurovilians with insufficient resources). And last, though only to a limited extent as sufficient monies are not yet available, it contributes to collective budgets like road repair, children's pony

farm, housing fund, land service, forest maintenance and a number of other budgets.

How to pay for all this? This was the major concern of the Economy Task Group, responsible for implementation of the experiment. That they succeeded is only due to the general willingness in Auroville to start changing Auroville's economy with proposal 2. Visits to almost all money-generating units of Auroville by this group have had a very positive result: all units agreed to pay Rs.200 per month for each Aurovillian working there and considerably increased the amount of their profits they donate to Auroville. Many Aurovilians who do not take any maintenance from an Auroville unit also agreed to pay Rs. 200 out of their own income. Quite a number of Aurovilians who have a larger regular income agreed to contribute more than Rs.200 per month. The income from guest houses has doubled, and, as if to show that we are on the right path, contributions from outside Auroville have increased.

For the individual Aurovillian who participates changes will occur. There will be no more surcharges levied on the bills for the Auroville services; repairs carried out by the Water Service and the Electrical Service will, to a large extent, be free, and the Nandini freestore will expand. Also, health and dental care will—to a certain extent—be free of charge.

Only a step, but, it seems, a firm step. We look forward to the next.

Carel

Peter, Nicole and their children Vikram and Suryamahi were on their way back to Auroville on the British Airways' London-Madras flight which was trapped in Kuwait on the 3rd of August. Nicole and the children are now in Paris, waiting for Peter to return from Baghdad where he is still held captive. His situation is a matter of continuing concern for the community.

Update

Organic Farming in the Villages

The challenge of economic viability

One of the aims of the *Auroville Food Co-op* is to provide training in ecological agriculture for local farmers. It also works on establishing a market for their produce in Auroville and Pondicherry. Recently, thanks to generous donations from Auroville International U.K. and U.S.A., and in collaboration with another programme funded by 'German Agro Action', it has begun a number of new activities. According to Sigrid, an Auroville resource person in the programme, these include the gathering of vegetable seeds and grains—for a seed bank to supply farmers interested in organic agriculture—and a kitchen-garden programme for village women. Cultivation of traditional varieties of such crops as finger millet and black gram once commonly grown for daily food has been started. The Pigeon Pea is being reintroduced, planted in hedgerows and intercropped with grains and pulses. Its deep roots are nitrogen-fixing, and it provides wind-breaks that attract harmful insects, thus diverting them from the main crop.

A revolving fund for farm products has been set up and will buy organic produce in the villages and sell them to Pour Tous and the Auroville Farms and Dairies. The Auroville Farms and Dairies have already constructed a small grain storeroom for this purpose. Nine hundred kilo's of unshelled organic Auroville cashews have been collected this year, and will be used for producing sweets, salted nuts and cashew butter to be marketed in Auroville and probably Pondy. This is a trial run aimed at creating a market for organically grown village cashews. A Food Processing Unit is to be set up for the solar drying, picking etc. of a variety of organic products such as mangoes, limes, bananas, tomatoes etc. Experiments are to be conducted, in co-operation with farmers, in the use of organic pesticides such as neem oil for vegetables, cashew and rice cultivation.

The major part of a 20-day training and contact programme, sponsored by 'German Agro Action' and organised by Auroville's 'Village Action', was completed in June and July. The sessions are meant for small farmers who work on five acres or less, and participants are chosen by the Village Action staff. Besides workshops, the programme involves frequent visits to

the farmers' fields, in order to establish a close relationship with the farmers. Twelve farmers, from different villages in the Auroville area, and three members of the A.G.R.C. group participated. With the recent August rains, farmers are now applying techniques on a trial basis, and seeds have been supplied to eight of them for this purpose. The follow-up will involve frequent visits to their fields. Later a study tour of organic farmers to a research centre in Tamil Nadu will be organised. Sigrid remarked, "Now that it's all over we're all a bit exhausted but nonetheless surprised by their enthusiasm! In our discussions they were interrupting us all the time, asking about the effects of fertilizers, how they work and so on. Four of our morning discussions were only about soils, and the others about insects, trees and the nutritional value of crops." Afternoons were devoted to going out into the fields to apply organic techniques; and there were visits to two Auroville farms where contour bunding, compost making and planting techniques were done. There was a consensus among the farmers that pests are on the increase due to new short-duration

varieties of crops and changed planting seasons. Sigrid: "We're interested in finding out the farmers' viewpoints, and we'd also like to tap into their knowledge of the land." The discussions were transcribed in Tamil and are presently being translated into English. One farmer in the programme who knows a lot about the traditional Tamil planting calendar—relating to the phases of the moon—is willing to give a talk for Aurovilians and other farmers on the subject.

Ardhendu, the programme coordinator, remarked following this first two-week session, "We have learned about the farmer's ways of looking at the problems of crop choice, tree planting etc. A mutual spirit of enquiry and trust has been developed, and as a result future experiments on Auroville and village sites will be more relevant and appropriate to the farmers' problems and situations."

Roger

P.S. Sigrid has just informed us that she has received a five-page poem in Tamil on organic farming written by one of the farmers.

Greenwork-projects underway

A number of greenwork projects are underway. The *Auroville Greenwork Resource Centre* (A.G.R.C.) is providing training in organic/ecological agriculture, land reclamation and afforestation to interested individuals and groups from the villages and elsewhere.

The *Canada Fund* is behind a project aimed at stimulating land regeneration and providing environmental education in the villages and surrounding areas. Work involves bunding, soil and water conservation, and the planting of fruit and forest trees on private farms and common village lands.

The *Commonwealth Human Ecology Council*, a British Agency, is sponsoring a two-point programme: 1) Training in the propagation of fruit trees, such as mango, guava, lemon and jackfruit, and 2) an environmental educational outreach in the villages through field trips, the formation of village 'eco'-clubs, small tree-planting projects, green walks,

school nurseries and the cleaning out of silted village drains and channels.

Indian government funds have also been provided for the formation and activities of 10 'eco' clubs of school students in different villages in the Auroville region.

The *Auroville International* centres of the U.K., Holland and the U.S.A. have been providing funding for numerous miscellaneous expenses such as T-shirts for an eco-club, the recent green walk, a pipeline to the village school for the watering of the newly planted trees and fencing for trees that had been planted by a local youth club.

Furthermore, *Auroville International U.K.*, recognising the importance of greenwork in Auroville and its outreach programmes, is providing for the maintenance of some of Auroville's greenworkers, to ensure that they don't have to divert their energies away from their main concern in order to survive.

Uninterrupted Power Supply

The Uninterrupted Power Supply (UPS) is a new electronic device, manufactured by 'Altecs' in Auroville and marketed throughout South India. Its most common use is with computer systems where extensive data loss can occur when the current unexpectedly goes off. This is a very frequent happening in South India; those who forgot to 'save' their input—and have had to do all the work again—know the irritation those unexpected power cuts can bring. The UPS connects a bank of batteries to the normal current mains and, whenever there's a power cut, switches instantly and automatically to the battery backup. This keeps the computer operational and gives time (up to a few hours depending on the size of the battery bank) to complete the work, to 'save' the data, to start a generator or whatever. The UPS will also warn you if your battery time is running out before it turns off everything to save the batteries.



Running on Sun

Christine and Edsat from 'Discipline' community, have now enough photovoltaic panels to charge their electric bike. This is probably the first vehicle in Auroville running on solar energy. 'Altecs', the Auroville electronic workshop, put together a relay box which allows them, with a touch of a button, to have direct current: 12V for charging the battery for their household system of lights and music; 24V for charging the batteries in the electric bike, or 48V for running a solar water pump.

Update

Aurelec and the German Connection

All computer users need to backup data constantly for reliable and continuous computer operations. Aurelec, Auroville's computer unit, developed tape backup systems for Local Area Networks (LANs) and standalone computers.

For LAN users, a unique non-stop computing software program called *LanImage* was developed which mirrors all current data onto a parallel fileserver computer system. If the main fileserver fails for any reason at all, the parallel fileserver takes over all operations instantly.

An international breakthrough came when Aurelec demonstrated the above products at international exhibitions like Informatics '89 in Singapore and at CeBIT '90 in West Germany, where a high level of interest was aroused among the knowledgeable visitors. This soon resulted in a very promising contact with a German firm, which was not only interested in

promoting Aurelec products in Europe but asked Aurelec to develop other new products jointly with them.

As a result, Aurelec has developed, in a remarkably short time, yet another innovative product, called the *Disk Shuttle*, which allows almost any laptop computer to access large-capacity storage devices like hard disks and tape drives through its parallel port. Since the market for laptop computers is growing at a really fast pace, this is precisely the type of product which has a tremendous marketing potential. *Disk Shuttle* will be manufactured and marketed in Europe as soon as a joint venture agreement is concluded between Aurelec and the German firm.

Meanwhile a sick phototypesetting unit was taken over by Aurelec and nursed back to health. The unit now grows fast as it processes many more manuscripts, e.g. for prestigious overseas printing presses like Oxford University Press. — Suresh

Center Guest-house gets bigger... and BIGGER

For the past three years those passing by at Center Guest-house have been seeing cement, wood, steel, as well as carpenters and masons around the compound. What started with the construction of a small guest-house and a new common bathroom, grew into major additions. First a new kitchen was added to the complex, to cater better for the many guests and Aurovilians who like to eat there. Soon the first meals will be served in the new dining area.

A grant from Auroville International U.K. made it possible to add a small guest-bungalow with two double bedrooms with attached bathrooms (with European-style toilets) and a common living room. 'Avalon', as it is called, was inaugurated on

Auroville's birthday (see *Auroville Today* no. 15).

Next to it, a bigger building is under construction, already nicknamed 'The Castle'. The American donor wanted to provide Auroville with a place where groups of Aurovilians and others could come to have meetings, seminars, workshops or just get-togethers. Therefore this building houses a meeting room for approximately 30 people, a smaller meeting room for 7 to 8 people, office space, a computer room, and on the second floor 4 double bedrooms. Three common bathrooms with solar water heaters and a small kitchen complete it. A big terrace on the roof gives space for whatever one feels like doing on a big roof terrace—sitting, dancing, meditating, watching the sunset... Hopefully this building will be ready to receive the first group of visitors in December.

Tineke



House with pottery, before the firing

Photo Bill

Kiln Fired Houses

You make a house out of mud, you put bricks and pottery and firewood inside, and use the house as the kiln to fire your pottery. If everything goes well, you have a house and a good stock of pottery afterwards. Does this sound like a workable idea?

Well, in fact two houses were recently fired in this way, as part of the new Auroville Information Reception Centre under construction near Bharat Nivas (see *Auroville Today* no. 10). The houses, the one-time kilns, are built as Nubian vaults (self-supporting parabolic arches) out of earth bricks.

The advantages of firing a mud house are the increase in structural strength, water resistance, and the hygienic and aesthetic advantage that ceramic walls can give. The firing does use up a few tons of wood, but the cost can be adjusted against the value of all the material that is fired inside the house at the same time. And as regards the environmental impact, the baking of traditional brick also requires wood.

A firing of pottery is always an intense affair. But in the case of the two houses, a sudden, heavy thunder shower threatened to make an unfortunate ending to the experiment by collapsing a provisional wall during the firing. The tension went up dramatically. Fortunately some people turned up that evening and succeeded in propping it up and preventing further collapse. A few weeks later, Ray, the potter who is the pioneer in this work, had recovered and could calmly say: "Well, of course, we did lose some pottery that got hit by the thermal shock (from cold air rushing in), but, after all, it wasn't such a big deal."

Later, another unexpected heavy rain started to erode the supporting wall and some additional brickwork was needed. Still, the project has been declared a success. The two houses are becoming some of the many living demonstrations of appropriate technology and renewable energy at the new Auroville Reception Centre.

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Kuilapalayam village today

Photo Sven

The Kuilapalayam Project

In 1972, there was a plan to upgrade Kuilapalayam village. This came to nothing. But today a new Kuilapalayam Project is bringing together villagers and Aurovilians from different fields like education, afforestation, health care and town planning to make a concerted attempt to improve the basic conditions in this village. A Kuilapalayam Development Committee has been formed of headmen, *panchayat* members, village youth and women. Their initial task will be to collect data to ascertain what needs to be done first, and to help create the right 'climate' for the project to come down into matter.

New Publication

A pamphlet called *Renewable Energy and Appropriate Technology in Auroville* is now available from the Auroville Press, Auroville, Kottakuppam 605104, T.N. India.

Auroville Today tries to appear monthly and is distributed to Aurovilians and friends of Auroville in India and abroad.
Editorial team: Yanne, Tineke, Sven, Sonja, Carel, Bill, Annemarie, Alan. Desktop publishing and layout: Annemarie. Printed at Auroville Press.

An Abundance of Projects

'Abundance' is a service of the Auroville Project Coordination Group. It was set up in 1989 to assist Aurovilians in the arcane art of writing funding proposals for projects. So far it has written or assisted in writing 51 proposals, 36 out of which appear in the 'Album'—the Auroville Development Plan which was presented to the Government of India. 'Abundance', which is operated by Guy and Alan, is located at the C.S.R. Office, Auroshilpam.

The Auroville Project Group meets regularly to endorse proposals for fundraising outside Auroville and coordinates various activities related to this. Here is a selection of project proposals written in the past year. Further information is available from C.S.R.

ENVIRONMENT AND AGRICULTURE

■ Annapurna Project

Objective: Research into indigenous agriculture along with the use of appropriate technologies and alternative energy sources. Budget: Rs. 5,01,750; US\$ 30.135 yearly.

■ Development of Waste and Marginal Lands in and around Auroville

Objective: To improve the ecological situation by massive plantation schemes and awareness campaigns. Budget: Rs. 38,13,370; US\$ 229.720

■ Eco-clubs Project

Objective: To set up 10 eco-clubs in the surrounding village schools in order to foster ecological awareness, resulting in environmental action like tree planting, water conservation, and use of non-conventional energies. Budget: Rs. 1,31,500; US\$ 7.898

■ Garbage Disposal Project

Objective: To create a hygienic and ecologically-sound garbage disposal system in Auroville. Budget Rs. 30,000; US \$ 1.800

■ Auroville Regional Organic Food Co-operative

Objective: To form a group of local farmers, willing to apply organic agricultural practices on their village land, while provided with a relative security against crop failure and with a market in Auroville for their biological products. Budget: Rs. 3,20,000; US \$ 19.220 (1st year) Status: Partially funded by Auroville International U.K.

■ Water Resource Awareness Campaign

Objective: To increase the awareness about water use and water conservation among youth, students, teachers, farmers, rural population and voluntary workers by preparing and distributing information materials and by organizing a workshop and exhibition. Budget: Rs. 1,04,000; US \$ 6,265

EDUCATION

■ Magic Child Project

Objective: To print and distribute the second book in the *Magic Child* series, designed to communicate Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's vision to children. Budget: Rs. 45,809; US \$ 2.751

■ Children and Trees Project

Objective: To increase environmental awareness among village children by providing an informative booklet called *A Boy and a Tree* and a teachers' manual in 300 schools of Tamil Nadu,

along with educational support from two Aurovilians. Budget: Rs. 2,95,675; US \$ 17.758

■ New Creation Boarding School

Objective: To expand and upgrade boarding facilities in New Creation, a village oriented educational community, in order to accommodate more children and teenage students from the villages in the existing boarding school. Budget: Rs. 7,30,800; US \$ 43.892

HEALTH

■ Dental Clinic and Laboratory

Objective: The construction of a fully equipped dental clinic and laboratory to offer a high standard of dental health care, to develop prosthesis of excellent quality, and to provide training, education and research in the field of dentistry. Budget: Rs. 99,81,290; US \$ 599.475

APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY

■ Centre for Scientific Research (C.S.R.) Training and Educational Project.

Objective: Improvement of C.S.R.'s infrastructure and training facilities, and creation of an Appropriate Technology documentation and information centre. Budget: Rs. 16,01,425; US \$96.182

■ Windmill Research Project

Objective: Research and development of four new windmill prototypes in order to increase the water pumping capacity from 60% to 200% compared to conventional windmill designs. Budget: Rs. 3,39,350; US \$ 20.381

VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT

■ Women, Health, Environment, Education and Community Development for Villages of Vanur Block, South India.

Objective: The alleviation of the material and physiological conditions of poverty in the villages surrounding Auroville through a programme of integrated development related to the growth of the experimental international city of Auroville. Budget: Rs. 20,80,450; US \$ 124.952 (1st year of a five-year plan)

■ Environmental Improvements and Community Organisation in Villages of Vanur Block, South India

Objective: To carry out agriculture and agroforestry related work and to provide training of village workers and co-financing of infrastructural development in the area of community organisation. Budget: Rs. 3,06,000; US \$ 18.434

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◆ ◆ ◆ To Receive Auroville Today ◆ ◆ ◆

The contribution for the next 12 issues of Auroville Today is for Auroville Rs. 94, for India Rs. 100*, for other countries: Rs. 350, Can.\$ 27, French F. 145, DM 45, It.Lira 31,500, D.Gl. 50, US \$ 22.50, U.K.f 13.50. This includes the postage by airmail. Please send your contribution (or your supporting contribution of double the amount) either to the Auroville International centre in your country (add 10%) or to the Auroville Today Office, Auroville, Kottakuppam 605104. Cheques should be made payable to Auroville Fund, specifying: Contribution for Auroville Today. You will receive the issues directly from Auroville.

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Look, the dolphins! ... in our next issue

Photo Sven

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In this issue: Bees; various updates; Shakti.

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SHAKTI

Walter and Tina came to Auroville from Belgium in 1978. After living in Djaima and Aspiration they moved, in 1984, to a plot of neglected land between Aspiration and the beach road. Today 'Shakti' (in Tamil it means 'power' or 'strength') is a thriving 25 acre community comprising forest plantation, fruit trees and a large nursery of ornamental trees and shrubs. 'Shakti' is also the base for an international seed exchange programme that links Auroville with 77 countries around the world.

AVT: How did it all begin?

Tina: Very simply. One day, when we were living in Aspiration, Peter A. asked us if we could help him to raise some trees and fence plants to plant around the community. We agreed.

Walter: At the beginning the nursery was mainly trees — mostly for Auroville, but we were also growing some for the local Forestry Department. From a small beginning, we soon had a nursery of 50,000 trees a year.

Tina: Then, the demand for forest trees slackened off and people started asking for ornamentals — shrubs and flowers. I didn't like to keep saying 'no', so I began growing them too. And that's how the nursery began.

Did you research into different methods of propagation?

Tina: At the beginning, yes. I discovered a good potting mixture for cacti and how to take cuttings when a plant is dormant. And how not to transplant or sow seeds at the new moon. In this sense, experimentation is continual, part of the process of caring for plants.

Walter: Actually, from the beginning we've been researching. Even in Aspiration, I had begun looking for a tree that would be ideal for the villagers to plant. Round here the village fields are bare for most of the year. I was searching for a tree that would be fast-growing, drought-resistant, that wouldn't be grazed by the goats and cows, and would provide good firewood.

Did you discover one?

Walter: Yes. *Acacia holosericea*. It's ideal — but the villagers didn't want to plant it! They said they didn't have enough space and they couldn't wait two or three years to start getting some returns. Ideally, they should have been provided with some financial support during the first few years to encourage them to begin. But that didn't happen.

Have the villagers adopted many of the things we've been doing on Auroville land?

Walter: Not much. They come to 'Shakti' for the trees they know — cashews, mangoes and jack-fruit. But that's about it. They still spray pesticides, they still use monoculture. But what's interesting about this tree *Acacia holosericea* is that it's had a great success with the Forestry Department. A friend of ours, Professor Jambulingam from the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University in Coimbatore, researched it and now it's planted everywhere in Tamil Nadu. And Auroville introduced it!

Is this how you got into seed exchange — through searching for the ideal species to grow here?

Walter: I was searching from the beginning, but the seed exchange gave it a wider scope. The idea came when I read a short paper written by Narad in 1981. He had begun contacting some botanical gardens and he had a list of addresses. So I started with them, seeing if I could discover species suited to this environment and our needs. Today we are part of an international free seed-exchange network. Every year we publish an index of the seeds we have available (in 1989 we offered seeds of over 333 species) and we exchange seeds with about 400 botanical gardens and a few universities in 77 countries around the world.

Do you specialise in particular varieties of seeds?

Walter: We offer seeds from trees, ornamentals and wild plants in our index, all collected in the Auroville area. Certain species, like *Strychnos nux-vomica* are much in demand. Most of the seed-exchange is with Russia and the U.S. And in exchange we are always looking for species that might grow well here. So we concentrate upon getting seeds of indigenous species from Africa, central America and Australia as these places have a similar climate to ours.

Are you experimenting with growing seeds from other climates?

Walter: Yes. There's a certain species of birch tree which grows in Belgium but also in southern California where they don't have a winter. So I'm trying it here. Another seed from the temperate zone that I'm trying is the edible chestnut. The seedlings are very small at the moment, so it's too early to know if they'll make it. But I'm also very interested in rediscovering the indigenous species that have grown in this area before. It's incredible: it's easier to get seeds from the Amazon basin than to get the seeds of the former indigenous species here. We know most of them by name, but it's very difficult to obtain them.

You now have a seed exchange programme and a nursery. What's the next step?

Walter: The next logical step is an arboretum. 'Arboretum' means a 'collection of trees'. In 1989, we began this project by planting about 100 species of trees, and we'll plant a similar number this year. So far, we've planted out about 10 acres, but eventually we'll need 100 acres for a viable arboretum. If we can get the money, I'm sure we can do it.

Another thing I've wanted to do for a long time is to publish a book about all the plants that grow in Auroville as we have a very rich flora here. One of the best known taxonomists in India is very enthusiastic about the idea, but unfortunately we don't have the money to do it at present.

Tina: For the future, I'd like to get the inspiration to begin working on the Matrimandir gardens with other Aurovilians. This is something I've always wanted to do. But it's not the right moment now, and I'm happy to continue with this work at present — making the world a bit more beautiful...

Did you ever realize what you were getting into when you began growing a few trees back in Aspiration?

Tina: No! But I don't regret it. Working with plants — it lifts up the spirit.

Walter: Auroville is already there somewhere. Mother said it. So we just have to keep trying to reach it. You do what you think your job is. I think I'm doing the right thing because it just keeps growing and growing. If I have to do something else, I'll do it.

Before coming to Auroville I was in construction, supplying contractors with pebbles, sand and cement. I didn't like it because, sooner or later, it all got turned into concrete — mainly for the construction of highways. Now, perhaps, I'm righting the balance. I didn't come to Auroville especially to plant trees — but I'm very happy to be doing this!

Interview by Alan